

Michon Madison

Wydown Middle School

One of my best friends at school is D. She's been my best friend since the second grade. She's known for her funny, enthusiastic soul. She loves the *High School Musical* movies and is always singing the songs. In choir class, I sometimes get the pitch wrong, and she will call me a "silly goose," and we both laugh. At lunch, I call her "pretzel head" because she has them for lunch everyday. We have almost every class together, which is great except sometimes we get in trouble for talking too much. This may sound like any middle school friendship, and it is. The fact that D. has Downs Syndrome and I don't doesn't really affect our friendship. I'm glad that D. is included just like everyone else.

I and others benefit from having D. in class. By having her in class, it makes me want to do the right thing and be a good role model to her. For instance, D. doesn't always like to participate in P.E. Sometimes I don't feel like it either, but I will be enthusiastic because I want her to be involved, too. Other students in my class will encourage her, too, and most of the time she'll join in because she wants to make us happy. She knows we care about her and want her to be included. D. helps me out in class, too. Whenever I get too talkative in literacy class, she'll catch my eye and give me a look like, "I'm watching you," because she knows I should be listening. This helps me stay focused. We're each other's "right hand man."

Although it may take her longer to process what we learn, D. is able to achieve academically, too. I admire the way that she doesn't give up, and I love to see the grin on her face when she gets the concept we are learning in class. D. is a very independent

person and does not want you to do things for her. For example, in science if we're working on a project, she wants to play a role in each aspect of the project. She should do this because she has the right to an education, just like everyone else.

Inclusion is important because everyone needs to understand each other and be able to interact and get along. D. and other students like her with disabilities deserve the chance to be included and feel like they belong. Sometimes I feel like I was put on this earth to remind D. and others that she is just like all of us. When D. comes to sit with me at lunch or I invite her to go see a movie on the weekend, she gets to experience life like a typical middle schooler. My friendship with D. has also shown my other friends without disabilities that she is outgoing, funny, sweet and kind—someone they want to be friends with, too.

Having this experience with D. has expanded my horizons. In the future, I would love to start a camp where kids with disabilities and without them can learn to get along with each other and have fun together. I want everyone with disabilities to be able to experience inclusion like D. has.